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People and Settlements in Tropical Lowland, with Special Reference to Their Unstability

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Introduction

One of the problems I met when I began preparation of a field study on the eastern coast of Sumatra was the lack of up-to-date maps. Available maps, including those of 1/100,000 scale compiled in the 1960s, showed many settlements that no longer exist and failed to show many new settlements. Settlements in tropical lowland, particularly in tropical rain forest, have always been unstable. This paper describes some of the examples which I saw in an

estuarine area of the Strait of Malaka in 1984.

I Geographic Setting of the Province of Manda

The province of Manda is located at the mouth of the Kuantan river. The whole of its area of 2,000 km² is covered by swamp forest except for narrow strips of strand line, which are lined by mangrove. As of 1984, Manda had a population of 29,315, and this comprises 9 villages (*desa*). The more populous southern

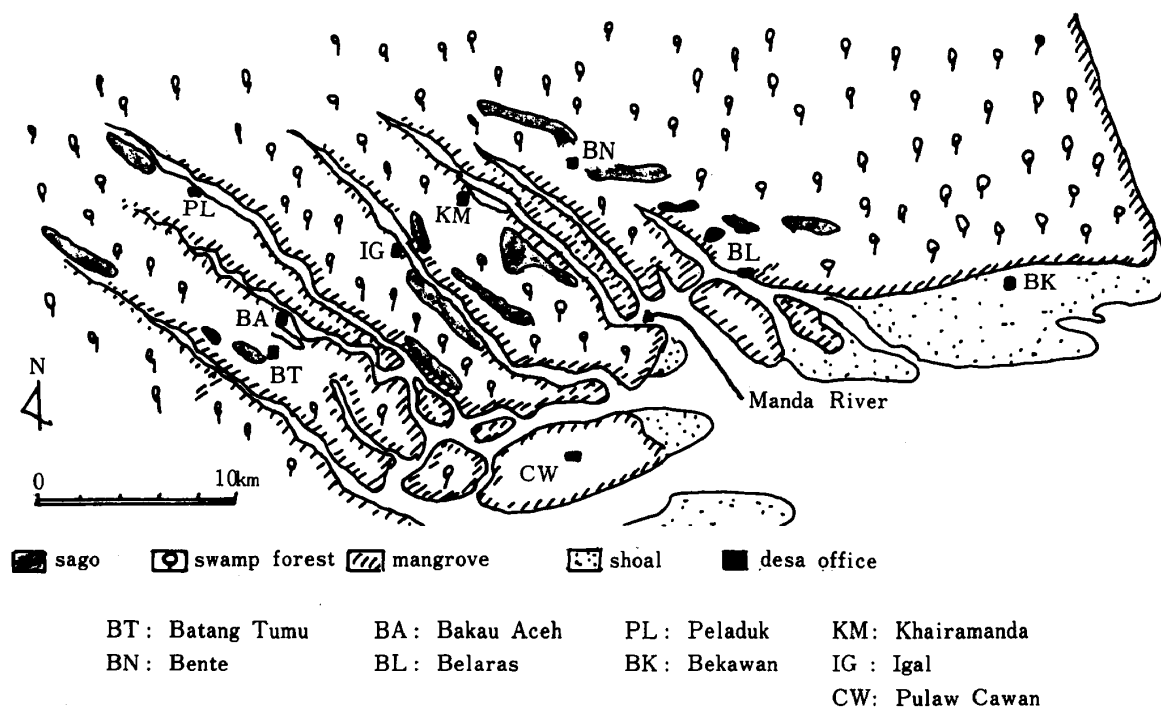


Fig. 1 The Southern Half of the Province Manda

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half of the province is shown in Fig. 1, including the three villages of Bente, Bekawan and Khairamanda, which are described herein.

II Bente: An Abandoned Sago-producing Settlement

II-a. Sutarjo before World War II

Sutarjo was one of the settlements (*kampung*) in the village of Bente. When World War II ended, it still retained a traditional settlement pattern, as shown in Fig. 2. The only entrance to the settlement was a small bay (2) facing Sungai Jarau (1), which is about 200 m wide and flanked by a mangrove belt (3) about 50 m wide. Behind the mangrove belt was a sago garden (4), in which 19 houses of the settlement (5) stood in a line. There was a mosque (6) built of wood at the southernmost end of the settlement. Behind the sago forest was an endless stretch of swamp forest (7). In the mangrove was a hut (8) called *pabrik* (factory) by local people, where they washed sago.

Until the 1920s, sago was washed at individual washing places in each house compound. Sago logs were rolled from the sago garden to the house compound, where the pith was scraped off with a nailed board. The scraped

pith was then washed to extract starch at the side of a well, which had been dug by the individual family. This traditional system disappeared when a pith-crushing machine was introduced. People built the hut (8) and installed the machine for communal use. They dug new washing wells at the hut site and thus the *pabrik* appeared.

Though Sutarjo's main occupation was sago production, people engaged in different jobs. They were fishermen and collectors as well. Sungai Jarau was a very good fishing ground for shrimp. Sometimes they went into the forest to collect dammar and bee honey. The shrimp and the forest products were sold to Chinese who lived at Sembuan, about 400 m from the village. Some people made trips to other villages and towns, mostly within a radius of 50–60 km from Sutarjo, to sell sago starch they produced. Sometimes they shipped sago to Singapore, which was 150 km away. The most important of the jobs outside sago production was the cutting of mangrove for charcoal. Chinese had many kilns on the banks of Sungai Jarau and bought *bakau* (*Rhizophora*) wood, which was famed for the high quality charcoal it yielded. Mangrove logs of usually about 20 cm across were also cut and sold to Chinese merchants

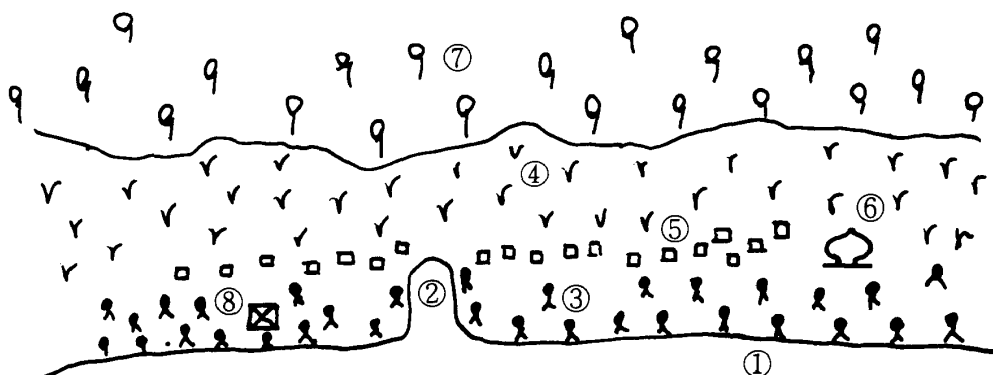


Fig. 2 Bente right after World War II

who shipped it to Singapore as building material.

II-b. Introduction of Coconut Palm

Sutarjo was thus a sort of compact settlement in a mangrove belt, but from 1950 it began to disappear as its residents dispersed. There were no houses left there in 1984 when I visited the site which was once Kampong Sutarjo. I found only some traces of rambutan and mangosteen within a deserted sago garden.

Why did the compact settlement disappear? The answer is that people switched their main crop from sago palm to coconut plam.

The first thing we have to know is that coconut palm, which is ubiquitous in the area today, is in fact a new crop, having been introduced to this area as a booming plantation crop in the 1910s. Some people began to plant coconut in Sutarjo in the 1930s, in the swamp forest behind the sago garden. To plant coconut palm did not require sophisticated knowledge. The only thing needed was to drain the area. People cut down trees, left them for a while to dry, then burned them. After this they dug ditches about 1 m wide and 1 m deep from the Sungai through the cleared plot in order to drain the peaty water into the river. Coconut seedlings were then planted at spacings of 7 to 8 m. The work required to open a coconut palm garden is virtually the same as that of traditional slash-and-burn cultivation and presented no technical problems for local people.

The only hazard they faced at this time was that of wild beasts, particularly wild hogs. Animals would attack the young coconut palms because the shoots tasted slightly sweet. Quite often a herd of 100 or more hogs would appear and destroy a newly planted garden in one

night. People tried to protect the plants by fencing the garden or by setting traps, but efforts of this kind were not effective. Finally they realized that the only effective way to guard their plants was to build their houses in the middle of their gardens and keep their eyes on the plants all through the year. One after another, people left their houses in the old settlement and moved to the newly opened coconut garden in the swamp forest. This is said to have happened right after World War II.

II-c. Spread of Coconut Plantation

In 1960, the government launched a policy of encouraging people to reclaim forest. Those who wanted to plant coconut palms were allowed to open any piece of forest upon making a simple application to the local government. Taking this opportunity, people came from other areas to join local people in opening coconut plantations

One example of the opening of a coconut garden was as follows. A Javanese who happened to be staying at Khairamanda as a seasonal worker made a plan to open a coconut plantation in the swamp forest of Sutarjo. Soon fifteen people, another Javanese, three from Sutarjo, five from Khairamanda and six from other regions joined the plan. They submitted an application to the provincial office under the name of the Javanese as the team leader, and a permit was granted immediately.

The actual work of the reclamation was done in the following way. They dug a ditch 1.6 m wide from Sungai Jarau to the swamp forest through about 150 m of mangrove. This work was done jointly by the 16 members including the leader. This common ditch was extended straight, right through the swamp forest, with

the digging done by individuals. The leader allocated plots for cultivation to each member, who dug half of the portion of the ditch which fell on his allocation. The width of individual gardens varied according to the requirements of the individual members, but the length of the gardens was fixed at 240 m. The older a man was, the nearer his allotment was located to the river, because such sites were more convenient and thought to have better soil. All the work from the cutting of the common ditch to the planting of coconut seedlings was completed within one year, and people built their houses on their own plots. Kampong Berayon I was thus formed in 1983.

This type of opening of coconut plantations started in the 1960s and was still quite widespread in the mid-1980s. The result has been the very rapid expansion of coconut plantations into the former swamp forest area.

Because of the way in which land is opened and settled, the settlement pattern is naturally disperse. Another characteristic of this newly developed area is the mixed population, as is suggested by the case of Berayon I. One more characteristic is the unstable status of the immigrants. In fact, a few families have already left Berayon I. One of them had to leave because all of the crops, cassava, taro and banana, which they had planted between young coconut plants had been eaten by wild hogs while they were away for a few days. Having lost their food, they had to leave the garden to find temporary work elsewhere.

Even the old settlement of Sutarjo was not as stable as might be thought, because of movements in and out for collecting and trade. But the new plantation settlement is far more unstable, mainly due to the difficulties of cultivation. In this tropical lowland, cultivation itself is a

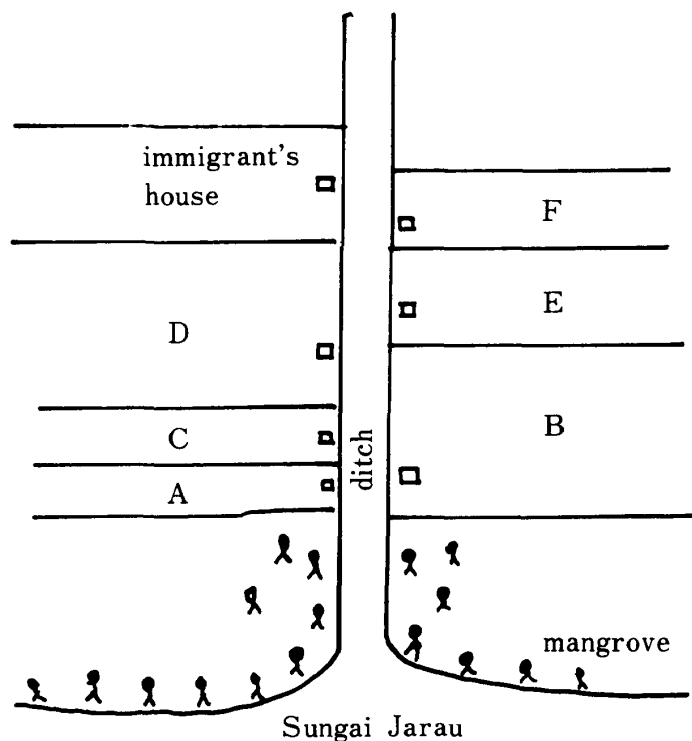


Fig. 3 Disperse Settlement Appeared in Coconut Plantation

new trial because of a variety of hazards, toxic soils and security, as well as wild animals.

III Bekawan: A Wandering Fishermen's Settlement

III-a. Bekawan as of 1984

Bekawan is a settlement built offshore in the Strait of Malaka. It stands 200 m from the outer edge of a mangrove belt, as shown in Fig. 4.

The settlement consists of two lines of houses standing on high stilts, and contains 194 families with 1,973 persons. The longer line of houses can be divided into three parts, A, B and C. Part A is a sort of administrative part, where the village office, school, clinic, etc. are

located. Part B is the so-called Malay quarter, containing Malay-style wooden houses with nipa roofs. Part C is readily distinguishable by its blue and white painted box-like houses. These are said to have been built by the government in the early 1980s as a part of a settlement program for *orang laut*. The shorter line of houses, or Part D, is called the Fukien fishermen's quarter, because this part is occupied by Chinese Indonesians whose homeland is supposed to be Fukien.

III-b. A brief History of Bekawan

In 1915, a merchant from Palembang, together with five friends, built a *bagan* offshore at Tanjung Datu, 7 to 8 km east of the present Bekawan. A *bagan* is a sort of frame erected in

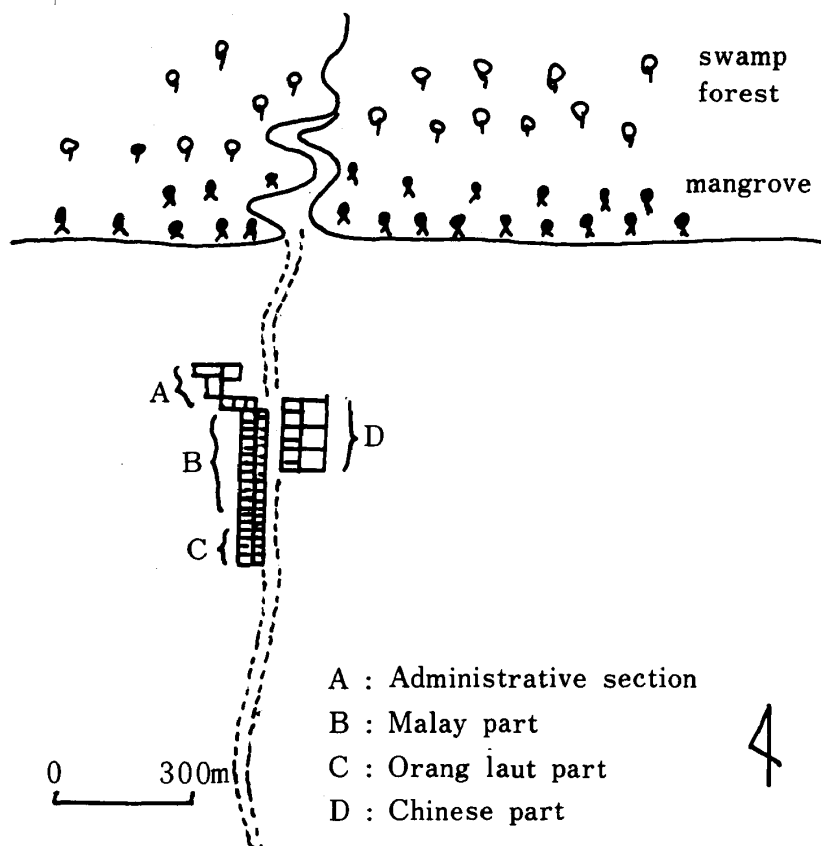


Fig. 4 Map of Bekawan as of 1984

shallow sea, on which a hut is built to house a family, and below which a net is set to trap shrimps. At this time there was no fishing village and no bagan in this area, only a small number of orang laut or boat people who visited seasonally. By 1920, however, the number of bagan at Tanjung Datu had increased to about ten, standing several hundred meters apart. We may say that there was a bagan settlement there in 1920. At this time there was nothing at the place that later came to be called Bekawan.

In 1931, a Chinese built a stilt house offshore of Bekawan. The exact site is the southern end of the present-day part A. He set a shrimp trap below his house and opened a stall to sell candies and small daily necessities. Soon after this, the head of an orang laut people built a similar house next to the Chinese. This was the beginning of Bekawan's history.

In 1936, a Malay from Belar (see Fig. 1) by the name of Mr. Muhamadi joined the two families. He built his house south of theirs, abutting that of the headman, and opened a coffee shop. This was the beginning of a sort of mass migration of Belar people to this area. They also came offshore, but they did not build houses, instead they built bagan like those at Tanjung Datu, 2 to 3 km further offshore from the three pioneers. By 1937, when Mr. Zen, the amir of Manda, visited the site and declared the foundation of Desa Bekawan, such bagan numbered about twenty. World War II started in 1941, and the situation in Bekawan during the war is not known.

An important change happened around 1960, when many people from the bagan began to build stilt houses next to the three houses of the Chinese, the orang laut headman and Mr. Muhamudi. Having moved with their families to

the newly built houses, they commuted to the bagan by motor boat. This became possible with the spread of small motor boats at prices they could afford, and as a result part B of Bekawan developed rapidly during this period.

In 1975, a group of Fukienese Indonesians moved in from Selat Panjang, a port town about 200 km north of Bekawan, and built part D. They were very active fishermen with much more sophisticated traps than the traditional bagan traps. Traditional shrimp trapping by the Malays collapsed entirely after the arrival of this Chinese group.

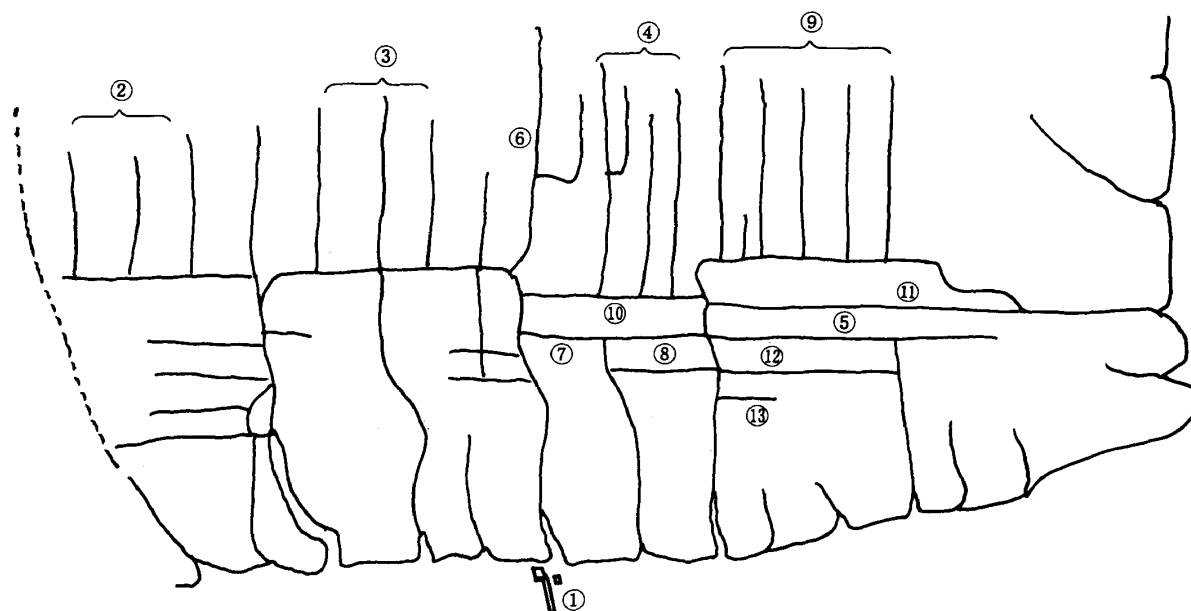
In 1980, the Indonesian Government built part C for orang laut, as mentioned before.

Above is a brief history of Bekawan. It can be seen to have developed rapidly in recent years with a mixed population. Today, with about 130 Malay, 15 Chinese and several tens of orang laut families, it is considered to be a typical fishing settlement in this area.

III-c. Expansion into the Forest

The complete history of Bekawan is in fact a little more complicated than just described, because the rapid development since 1960 led to other activities than fishing. Until 1960, Bekawan meant only the fishing settlement on stilts, but now the same name tends to include newer settlements in the forest area. Administratively, as of 1984 Desa Bekawan included 16 kampongs in addition to the fishing settlement. The original fishing village was later given the new name of Bekawan Luar, where *luar* means "front" or "out". The history described above is thus the history of Bekawan Luar.

The development of the forest area began in 1959, when Parit Banteng was dug and the first settlers arrived. Parit Medan was dug in 1960,



1. Bekawan Luar(194), 2. Sungai Sabar(117), 3. Bekawan Dalam Barat(90), 4. Bekawan Dalam Timur(44)
 5. Parit Banteng(30), 6. Parit Berkat(40), 7. Parit Malayu(17), 8. Parit Palembang(6), 9. Parit Baru(118)
 10. Parit Medan Barat(19), 11. Parit Medan Timur(8), 12. Parit Sanggul(15), 13. Parit Rengat(13)

Number in parenthesis is number of household.

Fig. 5 The Development of the Inland Bekawan

and a further group of ditches in Baru was dug in 1962. Settlement occurred in the same way as in Sutarjo. People dug ditches to drain land and secure a means of transportation. Soon tidal flow, which is often quite strong, widened the ditches, in many cases to more than 5 m within several years after their being dug.

The inflow of people into the forest was also rapid, and by 1984 the *parit* system shown in Fig. 5 was completed. According to the desa head, there were 800 families on the parit banks, forming 16 kampongs. The population is composed of 50% Bugis from Sulawesi island, 15% Banjar from Kalimantan, 15% Malays from this vicinity and 20% others. Others include Javanese and Chinese. The main occupation of these people is coconut palm growing. As of 1984 the desa had 8,634 ha of coconut palm gardens, 1,171 ha of srash-and burn fields, and

309 ha of wet rice fields. The srash-and-burn fields are cleared plots waiting for planting of coconut seedlings.

The above is a rough history of inland Bekawan since 1959. The area does, however, also have a "pre-coconut" history. Parit Palembang, which is settled by six families today, is said to have had been dug in 1938 by a group of people from Palembang, all of whom are said to have migrated to Singapore during World War II. People also say that the mangrove forest was used by Bugis smugglers as a hide-out before 1959. The forest area was, thus, not strictly unused; rather, it was used sporadically.

On learning the history of the inland, I realized that the life of Bekawan Luar was not as simple as one might assume from the words "fishing settlement." For instance, Mr. Gahun,

who spent ten years at the bagan of Tanjung Datu during his childhood and later served as the village head of Desa Bekawan for ten years, can be considered to be a typical fisherman; but in fact he is also involved in a coconut palm plantation. He is the man who organized an immigrant group and dug Parit Medan. The family of the present village head of Desa Bekawan lives in part B of Bekawan Luar, and also has a coconut garden and wet rice fields in the swamp forest. This family used to live in Khairamanda before World War II and sago washing was their main job. But they moved to Bekawan Luar to participate in the then booming shrimp trapping, and settled down there.

The history of Bekawan implies at least two things. One is that the so-called fishing settlements are short-lived. Settlements appear sud-

denly and grow quickly but disappear suddenly as well. This occurs because fishing grounds move, and is facilitated by the "mobile" nature of the houses. The second thing is that individual people can move easily. They move from one fishing settlement to another, and often move to the forest as well. There is certainly an interflow of population between the sea and the forest. The so-called fisherman in the Malay world is not necessarily a professional fisherman. A fisherman today may become a forest product extractor tomorrow.

IV Khairamanda: the Provincial Capital

IV-a. Old Khairamanda

Khairamanda is the provincial capital of Manda. It can be reached either by the Manda river

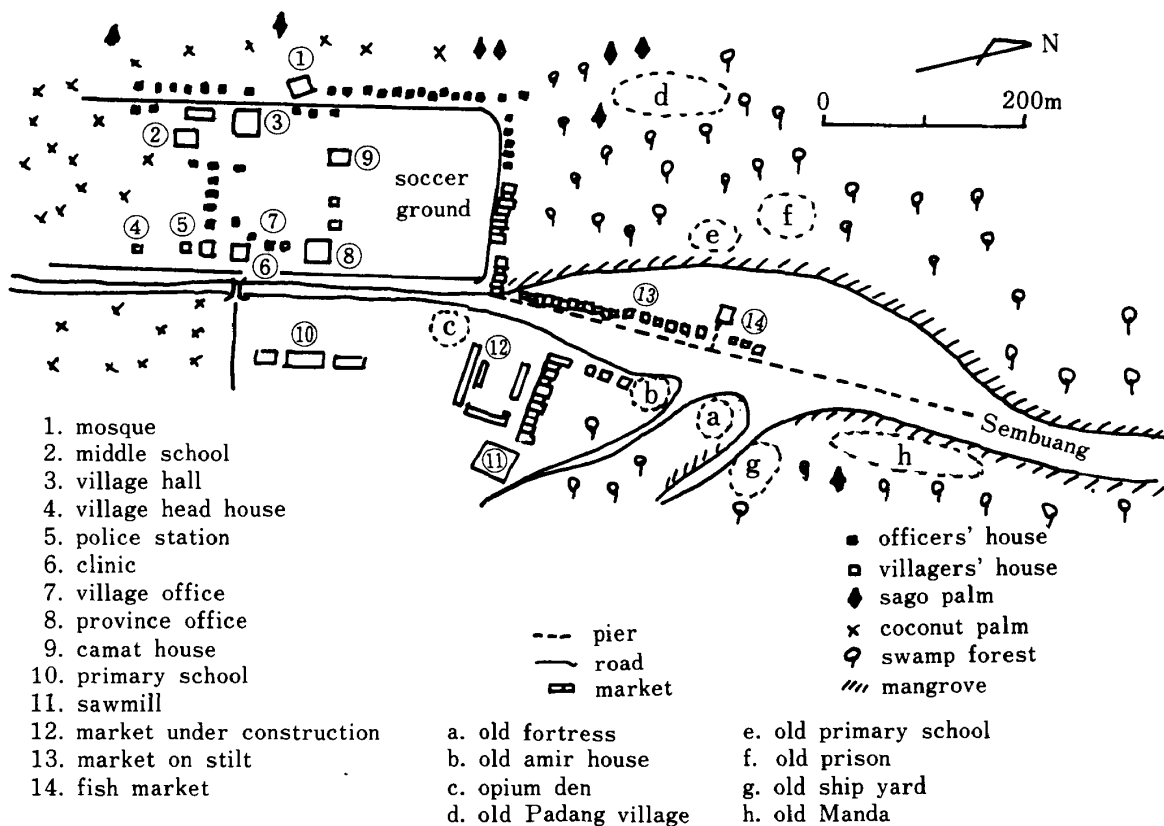


Fig. 6 Administrative Center of Manda as of 1984

or the Igal river, and these two rivers are connected by a canal on which the provincial office is located. In front of the office building is an open space called the soccer ground, around which are a police station, a health center, schools, houses for officers, and a small market. No building is taller than two stories, and all are made of wood; but the layout, particularly the geometric arrangement around the soccer ground gives this area the feeling of an administrative quarter. Fig. 6 is a map of this quarter of Khairamanda.

Khairamanda is a new settlement. Its predecessor, called Manda, was located a few hundred meters east of the present office area, though it has now disappeared completely. Fig. 7 is a schematic map of Manda around 1910, showing it to have been located on a small bay facing the Manda river. About forty houses faced the bay, each with a sago garden behind. At the eastern end of the settlement was a wooden mosque, and at the western end a brick-built fort and an amir's residence. A few hundred meters to the east, at the mouth of the bay, was a small enclave of Chinese. The whole

settlement was surrounded by a huge swamp forest.

As of 1984, the Chinese settlement was still there; four to five large houses were standing on stilts right in the water. Manda settlement itself had disappeared leaving only a small amount of debris from the brick of the old fort in the mangrove at the river bank.

IV-b. The Center of Administration

The province (*kecamatan*) of Manda is said to have been formed as successor to the administrative unit of Sultanate. According to an informant, this area was governed by a chieftain under the Sultan of Lingga, an island 100 km to the east. The chieftain's fort was first built at Lengkap, 5 km south of Khairamanda, but in the course of time it was moved to Igal, Bente and finally to Manda. Though the site of the fort moved, the area governed remained unchanged, covering what is today called Kecamatan Manda, and the chieftain collected taxes mainly from gambling. The last chieftain was Tengku Syarif, a son of Sultan Riau, who was expelled by Dutch military power at the end of

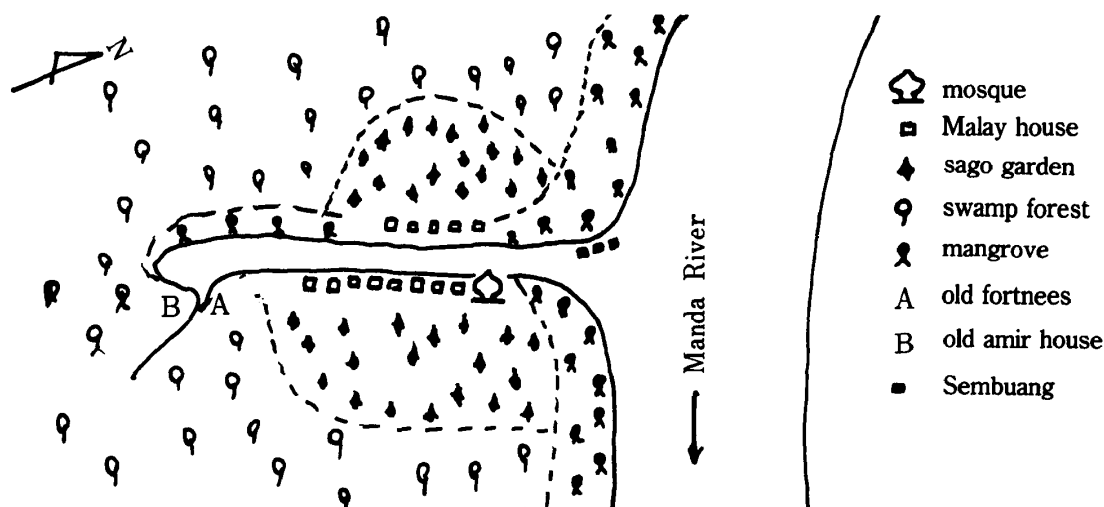


Fig. 7 Schematic Map of Manda around 1910

the nineteenth century.

After the Dutch came to the area, the traditional chieftain system was replaced by the amir system, and Tengku Saleh, a son of the displaced chieftain, was appointed as the first amir. The newly established amir did not live at the old fort but built his residence next to the fort. The fort which is shown in Fig. 7 is this amir's residence. The new administration levied a poll tax, and an export tax, which extended to sago.

The first four amirs came from Tengku Saleh's family, while three of their four successors were Minangkabau men, whose motherland is the mountain area of Sumatra more than 200 km away from this coastal area. The eighth amir was Mukhatar Zen, who declared the foundation of Desa Bekawan in 1937. During World War II, a Guncho replaced the amir, and after the war the new post of *camat* (head of kecamatan) was instituted. Most of the *camat* came from the Minangkabau group.

During my fieldwork, Bente people told me that they used to export sago to Singapore and import rice and other commodities. I was surprised by this, because the local people seldom ate rice; and they explained that they imported rice to sell to the Khairamanda people. They also told me that Khairamanda people were outsiders and preferred rice to sago. Right in the midst of the Malay villages in the huge forest, this provincial capital is something different from the indigenous Malay villages.

IV-c. *Foreigners*

I still clearly remember the conversation I had when I met Mr. Abdra Rani for the first time. I met him with the intention of asking about the traditional sago production, because people had selected him as an informative elder

of the area. But this intention was frustrated. He began the conversation by describing his genealogical background. He said "My grandfather was in Trengganu, where he worked at the bureau of the *bundahara* (minister of finance) of the Kingdom of Pahang. My father was a merchant. He came from Trengganu to Manda on business and happened to marry a Manda lady, that is, my mother. I was brought up in Manda but went to Singapore when I was old enough to make trip and became a policeman in British Singapore." The conversation shifted from his family background to his relatives and to the story of the royal families of Pahang and Riau Lingga. And it never came to the sago. After a long discourse, I found that the elder of the area had no identity with Manda, but was rather a sort of roaming elite, moving around what might be called the Malay world, with no fixed home at any place.

I failed to get information on sago from Mr. Abdra Rani, but his talk stimulated my interest in the elite class of the region. I talked about this to the village head of Khairamanda, at whose house I was staying. He said that his family was also not originally from Manda. Four generations earlier, one of his ancestors had moved from his native village in Minangkabau to Johor, and later Manda. His wife's ancestors were from Lingga island. Her great-great-grandmother was a Chinese who was sold at Banka island. After describing his family background, this village head said "There is no one who can be called a Manda *asli* (original man of Manda). All of the villagers are immigrants from different places, like Lingga, Pahang, Minangkabau and so on."

His comment sounded very convincing. I had already got the impression from talking with

people living in the administrative quarter of Khairamanda that many of them were outsiders. Many of the officers I met there were single men from different provinces, and some had married local women and settled down there. Inter-marriage had introduced outside elements and will continue to do so.

IV-d. Chinese

In talking of outside elements, we cannot neglect the Chinese, who have a long history of commitment to Manda. For instance, Sembuang in Fig. 7 was there as early as 1910 and remains there even though old Manda has shifted to Khairamanda. Sembuang today sells building materials like tin, nails, and plastic pipe, and it has gas filling station for boats. These houses are much larger than those of the Malays at the market place near the square. The Chinese have large boats and are said to make frequent trips to Singapore.

The Chinese at the time of old Manda seem to have been quite active. In this respect, an elder told me an interesting story about the time when the Manda-Igal canal was dug, and the amir's residence was shifted from old Manda to its new site, which local people today call the camat house. At this time the Sembuang Chinese built an opium den in front of the new amir's residence on the opposite side of the canal. The elder described the newly built opium den in terms that might apply to a fancy coffee shop at Yoyogi, Tokyo today, and concluded that the combination of the newly dug canal, the amir's residence and the opium den was a real symbol of modernization of the area. His words suggested what sort of social position the local elites ascribed to the Chinese. The Chinese at that time were, I believe, consi-

dered to be in the important social class who brought in attractive outside culture and money, together with the amir and other elite. At least this elder rated the function played by the Chinese quite highly.

Another informant of Khairamanda told me, "We were good friends in those days. When they saw me cutting wood in the forest they brought me a very good ax and allowed me to use it free of charge. And they were also thoughtful. They knew the tides when people went fishing, and kept their lamps on at night so that the fishermen could bring their fish to the Chinese shop right after the catch. If they had not been with us, our life would not have been as convenient as that." The Chinese seem to have been welcomed not only by the elite but also by ordinary people.

Khairamanda today is the administrative center of the province. It governs the province, but its core members are men from other provinces. This situation of outsiders governing the area seems to have been the case throughout its history. At the time of the amirs, or the Dutch period, the core was formed by the amir, and the Chinese and Malay elite. All of them were outsiders in a sense. During the sultanate period as well, the situation was probably more or less the same. The chieftain and his people were dispatched from the Riau-Lingga court rather than local people.

Conclusion

I have described three Malay settlements: a sago-producing settlement, a fishing settlement and an administrative settlement. In all cases, people migrated easily from one place to another, and because of this the membership of

settlement was unstable and mixed.

Why does this drift and mixing of population occur? My answer is that it occurs because population density is very low and land use can therefore be rough and extensive. This situation is quite the opposite of that of Japan. In Japan, where wet rice growing is the main landuse, suitable land is very limited: only irrigable valley bottoms are valuable. Moreover, in the case of rice cultivation, the more labor is put into the land, the better its quality becomes. In such a situation, land once settled is rarely abandoned.

Tropical lowland cannot be used as in the case of Japan, because of the miasmic conditions. Staying in the forest to cultivate land was almost a suicidal act in this malaria-affected area, at least until effective medicinal care became available. The only safe way to live in such a lowland was to stay on the coast or the bank of a large river, where the wind can blow away the mosquitoes. Agriculture is impossible under these conditions. The only possible activities are fishing and collecting forest products. Fishing, requires moving to follow the fish, and

being a collector requires moving to look for richer spots in the forest. In either case, life tends to be quite mobile.

In the tropical lowland of Southeast Asia, this type of fishing and collecting has continued for 2000 years, while the sedentary type of agriculture in the form of plantations started much more recently. Plantation agriculture started in the nineteenth century and reached its peak in the early twentieth century when rubber-growing spread. The coconut-growing that is expanding today is not plantation agriculture in the strict sense, but it is on the same lines as the landuse established by the commercial planters, and it is definitely a sedentary cultivation. After the spread of coconut growing, local people began to realize that land itself has economic value.

Forest products and plantation crops must be sold to the outside world. For this reason, although the area appears remote on the map, it keeps in close contact with outside world, not only through merchants but through administrative channels and at the individual villager level.